

History comes alive in 'Reunion'

By BARBARA GREILING
For the Potomac News

A performance incorporating the words of eyewitnesses to the Civil War with music of the period promises to be a lively history lesson, but not necessarily an evening of compelling theater.

"Reunion, A Musical Epic in Miniature," now on stage at Ford's Theatre, however, is a memorable and moving production. It breathes life, drama and a sense of immediacy into events that are familiar to anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of U.S. history.

The play is reminiscent of Ken Burns' PBS series "The Civil War" as it intertwines letters from soldiers, memoirs of nurses and words of historical figures with marches and melodies from the war years. Indeed, in the program notes, playwright Jack Kyrieleison acknowledges that the television series sparked his interest in the period. Live theater, though, offers an intimacy that is impossible on the small screen, and at Ford's Theatre, the production has the advantage of a venue that played a key role in the events of the play.

A play-within-a play, "Reunion" is presented as a performance by a troupe of six, headed by Harry Hawks, a real actor who was on stage at Ford's when John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln. Twenty-five years have passed, and Hawks and his band are now recalling

■ "Reunion",
■ Through June 18
■ Ford's Theatre, 511 Tenth
St. N.W., Washington, D.C.
■ Tickets \$27-\$43
■ Call (202) 347-4833

Theater review

the war years in 19th century theatrical fashion with placards, "magic lantern" slides, musical tunes and melodrama.

The play begins with Lincoln's elections and traces the events of the war through the attack on Fort Sumter and the battles of Manassas, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg and Petersburg, and ends with Lincoln's assassination and the mourning that followed.

Confederate history buffs should be warned that this is the Civil War from the Union perspective. Kyrieleison makes no apologies for that. In the program notes, he says "Reunion" doesn't try to be Everybody's Civil War. ... But I think it has as good a claim as any to be Harry Hawks' Civil War."

Among the themes that run throughout the play is Lincoln's search for a strong military leader for the Union forces. The president's frustration with his cautious commander Gen. George McClellan takes up much of the first act. James Judy, as Harry

Hawks, portrays the general, who is billed as "The Little Napoleon" on a magic lantern slide, as an arrogant egotist, who clearly holds Lincoln in contempt.

While Lincoln's presence is strongly felt throughout the play, he is never seen. Lincoln's young secretary, played by Joe Cassidy, delivers the president's words.

Kyrieleison and musical arranger Michael O'Flaherty skillfully weave the song "Marching Along" together with a soldier's account of boredom in the Union camp and the conflict between the military commander and the commander-in-chief. When McClellan demands more horses, the impatient president pointedly asks the inert general what could possibly have tired the horses he has.

Slavery and the Union's reluctance to embrace emancipation and to allow blacks to join in the fight are another focus of the play. Early in the performance, a soldier proclaims loudly that he is fighting to preserve the Union, not to end slavery. Frederick Douglass, given voice by James Stovall, questions why, when the Union desperately needs fighting men, it is turning away blacks.

When blacks are finally allowed to enlist, Stovall, who appears throughout the play as several slaves, freedmen and soldiers, joins Harriet D. Foy in the stirring "Heav'n Bound Soldier."

The two, who play husband and wife in Hawks' fictional troupe, also join forces for the haunting "Wake, Nicodemus."

Music ranges from familiar war songs such as "Marching through Georgia" and "Tenting on the Old Camp Grounds," spirituals such as "Steal Away" and "Wasn't That a Wide River" and patriotic pieces like "Lincoln and Liberty" and "We'll Fight for Uncle Abe" to music hall tunes like "Grafted into the Army" and sentimental songs such as "Somebody's Darling." The six very versatile performers, who all play multiple roles, have excellent voices that blend together beautifully.

Whitney Webster, who plays various nurses, abolitionists and mothers, is a vocal standout. In one stunning scene, she appears above the stage singing "Beautiful Dreamer," as Ric Ryder portrays a young soldier whose leg is being amputated. In lesser hands, this scene might easily have become mawkish, but with Webster's angelic voice and Ryder's disciplined performance, it is truly moving.

The most memorable moment in the production, however, is the assassination scene. Hawks recalls standing alone on the Ford's Theatre stage when Booth jumped down from the presidential box after shooting President Lincoln. The audience, thinking Booth's sudden appearance was part of the play, continued to laugh and applaud as Hawks stood in stunned silence. As the troupe recreates the events of that night, a spotlight rests on flag-draped box, which appears



Photo by Stan Barouh

A play-within-a-play, "Reunion" at the Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., is an opportunity not to be missed.

as it did on April 14, 1865. The historic theater — and the audience — become an integral part of the performance.

"Reunion" is an inventive and inspiring theatrical work, and seeing it at Ford's Theatre, is an opportunity not to be missed.